Analysis of Spiritual Formation Practices in DMiss Cohorts

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Spiritual Formation is an important part of who we are at Fuller Theological Seminary—at least we say it is. But we have struggled with how to measure it, how to determine what, and if, it is happening. What is the role of a seminary? What is the role of the church? Most professors regularly have some kind of devotion or prayer at the beginning of class, but how is this forming students? Do we know if this makes any kind of difference in the lives of our students? While these questions have been asked and discussed often, we seem to have few answers.

This study is an attempt to examine spiritual formation practices in one specific program only. Information has been gathered from thirteen current cohorts from the Doctor of Missiology Program (DMiss) at Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Intercultural Studies. The goal has been to do an initial assessment of our best practices and identify some key areas for improvement. The impetus for the study came from WASC (our accrediting body) who has required us to evaluate and report on our spiritual formation practices and outcomes in our various degree programs.

One of the biggest challenges, historically, in our doctoral programs has been the integration of our academic journeys with our spiritual journeys, bringing them together so they "speak" to one another and are not two separate pieces of our lives. My interest in this topic started when I was Director of our Doctoral Programs, PhD and DMiss, and came from talking with students about the loneliness of the academic journey as a doctoral student and the impact that had on their spiritual vitality. Now I am working with DMiss students in a cohort-based program. Students are on campus for two weeks each year for the first three years, and a single week the fourth year. During the remainder of the nine month term, students interact with each other and with the professors online, while doing their research, focused on their individual projects. The focus of this study is primarily on the spiritual formation practices and experiences during the two week intensives when students are gathered together on campus with potential implications for the rest of their nine-month term.

Value of Spiritual Formation

Studies have shown that one of the key reasons pastors leave the ministry or fail in ministry is due to the lack of intimacy with God, combined with the lack of accountability for personal life issues. Frequently these are related to the lack of balance between spiritual practices and disciplines with the overload of work and lack of attention to family and recreation. J. Robert Clinton's work on Leadership Emergence Theory has shown that Christian leaders who finish well are those that have established habits of intimacy with God and have had significant mentors in their lives (2012: 210-215). Spiritual formation is a key process of development over the life of a leader, not something that happens early in life and then lasts for the rest of life. Randy Reese and Robert Loane's work on mentoring has shown that the intentional relationships of accountability and mentoring one-on-one or in small groups increase the ability of a leader to be effective and maintain vitality in life and ministry (2013). Clinton (2012), Reese and Loane (2013), and Wilson and Hoffman (2007) all point to the need for intentionality throughout a life to develop healthy practices of spirituality and formation. For us, in the DMiss program, this raises the questions of what and how are we doing in guiding students along this journey? While there are skills that can be learned, what are we doing to encourage the practice of the skills for the future?

Research

The primary findings reported in this study are from two surveys, one with faculty and one with students. Selected responses to a question about spiritual formation on student course evaluations have also been included. The faculty survey was sent to twelve key faculty who have taught in two or more intensive courses in one or more cohorts. The student survey was sent to 94 students who had attended one to four module intensives. Forty-nine students responded to the survey, with a relatively balanced percentage representing the completion of the 1-4 modules (see Table 1). Each category, except those completing only Module 1, shows

a greater than 50% response rate. Because of the timing of the survey in relation to the timing of module intensives, the results reflect greater numerical responses from those who had completed only Module 1 or all four modules than those who had completed just Modules 1 and 2, or just Modules 1 through 3.

Table 1: Student Respondents to Survey

Students who competed	Responses	Number of Cohorts	Total students who have completed each set:	Percent of responses
Module 1	16	4	42	38%
Modules 1 & 2	10	2	16	63%
Modules 1, 2, & 3	7	2	10	70%
Modules 1, 2, 3, & 4	14	5	26	54%

Faculty and students were asked to give a value to each of the different spiritual formation practices that have been used in different cohorts, and then to rank what they felt were the top five best practices. In addition they were asked to give an example of one of the best practices,

and a practice that didn't work as well with suggestions for improvement. Respondents also indicated which practices they had not used or experienced.

Value Rating Selected Practices

While the number of respondents is not sufficient to guarantee a high degree of accuracy, the responses do provide information about some trends of what both students and faculty experience as valuable. While the exact order differs slightly between the students and the faculty, the practices seem to fall into three similar groupings in both surveys. (See Tables 2 and 3).

The first group relates to devotions led by faculty or students and prayer times that were either planned or spontaneous. The second group included times of praise and worship and the half-day retreats. The lowest ranking group included the personal rule of life and the community rule of life. The comments add to the significance of each of these categories.

While these values are only suggestive, the additional comments (discussed below) added further significance to the various choices.

Table 2: Student Value Rating of Selected Practices

	Rank of value 1-3	Based on # responses (out of 49)
1. Professor led devotions	2.79	47
2. Regular prayer for one another	2.74	39
3. Spontaneous prayer times as need arose	2.65	43
4. Student led devotions	2.60	48
5. Praise and worship times	2.48	35
6. Half-day retreat	2.43	28
7. Personal Rule of Life	2.10	42
8. Community Rule of Life	1.93	42
Other practices: time spent in fellowship over meals with students and professors together.		

Table 3: Faculty Value Rating of Selected Practices

	Rank of value 1-3	Based on # responses (out of 8)
1. Student led devotions	2.63	8
2. Professor led devotions	2.49	7
3. Half-day retreats	2.40	5
4. Spontaneous prayer times as need arose	2.38	8
5. Regular prayer for one another	2.29	7
6. Praise and worship	2.18	7
7. Personal Rule of Life	2.00	4
8. Community Rule of Life	1.50	6
Other practices noted included: simulation exercises, sharing personal life/spiritual journeys, Lectio Divina, Bible study exercises, sharing passions and experiences.		

Ranking of the Spiritual Practices

The respondents were also asked to rank their top five out of ten different practices. The results fall into two groups based on the number of people who rated each one in the top five. For students, the division was basically the same as the way they valued the different practices: Prayer times and devotions were ranked in the top five by 34 or more of the students, while the other four were ranked in the top five by less than 20 respondents, (see Table 4).

The responses of faculty were similar. Six or seven out of eight ranked devotions, spontaneous prayer times and praise and worship in the top five, only one or two ranked the remaining four in the top five. Interestingly, the faculty rated the devotional times significantly higher than the prayer times, while the students ranked the prayer times higher, (see Table 5).

Table 4: The Top Five of Ten Practices as Rated by Students (Weighted rankings)

	Ranking 1-5 (highest)	# ranked in top 5 (out of 49)
Ranked by 34 or more students		
1. Regular prayer for one another	3.15	34
2. Spontaneous prayer times as need arose	3.06	36
3. Professor led devotions	3.00	41
4. Student led devotions	2.87	40

	Ranking 1-5 (highest)	# ranked in top 5 (out of 49)
Ranked by less than 20 students		
5. Praise and worship times	3.32	19
6. Personal Rule of Life	2.75	16
7. Half-day retreat	2.53	19
8. Community Rule of Life	2.46	15

Table 5: The Top Five of Ten Practices as Rated by Faculty

	Ranking 1-5 (highest)	# ranked in top 5 (out of 8)
Ranked by 6 or 7 Professors		
1. Professor led devotions	4.8	6
2. Student led devotions	4.0	7
3, Spontaneous prayer times as need arose	2.1	7
4. Praise and worship times	2.1	7
Ranked by only 1 or 2 Professors		
5. Regular prayer for one another	2.2	2
6. Personal Rule of Life	2.5	2
7. Half-day retreat	1.6	2
8. Community Rule of Life	3.0	1

Examples of Best Practices

The responses of value ratings and ranking of the practices are just numbers. However, when responses to examples of best practices are considered, these numbers take on new significance. This section includes a number of examples that demonstrate the significance of different practices.

Students gave examples of praying together and for one another (10 examples), times of fellowship and sharing meals with professors and students together (10 examples); dedicated time alone with the Lord about their research program either on a half-day retreat, an overnight retreat, or a limited 90 minute reflection time (9 examples); experiencing the diversity of traditions, backgrounds, and cultures (9 examples), and the value of sharing personal journeys either in devotional times or in fellowship gatherings (8 examples).

The fact that students gave a number of examples of praying together and for one another was not surprising given their value ratings of these practices. However, the times of fellowship and sharing meals was a surprise in that it was not included in the initial choices, but very clearly emerged in the comments from the students. This kind of relational connection on an informal basis built significant bonds, provided encouragement, and support for the students. The personal connection with the lives of professors and one another in a casual context seemed to be key.

Likewise, the practices that led to times of retreat emerged as much more significant when combined with the three different types of practices among different cohorts that all led to the same result: half-day retreats, overnight retreat, and 90 minute mini-retreats were all identified as valuable times set aside to listen to God and what God might say about their course of study and research. Students felt that the intentional time set aside to seek God's guidance was essential. As one student said, "this was an important time, as God spoke to me [about my project]." Another commented that they had seldom had "such concentrated, personal listening-to-God time," and found that valuable. From personal

observation, I almost always have students report that the Lord spoke to them either to affirm what they were planning, or to provide significant re-direction they had not anticipated when they got quiet and listened.

Several students noted the value of praying for peers after they led a time of devotions or when they shared their personal spiritual journeys. This became a time of affirmation for a student and sometimes a confirmation of what they had already been hearing from the Lord. Students commented on the value of experiencing the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives which gave them a deeper appreciation for differences among cohort members. A significant number of students named examples of times of fellowship and informal interaction over meals, including praying for one another and with peers and professors, saying these were times that built community and strengthened friendships. Some of the practices seem somewhat fluid, such as prayer for one another, in that it occurred in intentional times of devotion, moments when needs arise, times of retreat, or times of informal fellowship with faculty and peers. The fact that this appears in a variety of contexts suggests that an atmosphere of prayer does emerge in the context of the gathered cohorts.

One example that illustrates the value and importance of being open to a spontaneous response to a student need came when a student received a message about a crisis in his ministry. The entire cohort gathered around the student and spent about fifteen minutes in prayer with him. The student commented later that this had been a transformative experience in his relationship with the cohort as he had joined this cohort in Module 2 and had not been part of the initial formative experiences of Module 1. This experience in Module 3 affirmed to him that he really did belong to this cohort.

The creating of a Personal Rule of Life, and a Community Rule of Life definitely got mixed responses. Some professors have used these exercises very successfully. However, from student responses, it appears that others have not followed up on them when the cohorts are gathered, so the feeling is that these are just exercises without any intentional follow-up or accountability. One student noted that by Module 4, the Rule of Life had "fallen off the radar." This is definitely an area that we need to pursue further as faculty to see if and how we can better include these activities with the cohort. The Community Rule of Life seemed more problematic to students in that students are not closely connected with one another except during the intensives. They all have other "communities" they are connected to and more committed to than the cohort, so the Community

Rule of Life needs to consider this reality. Perhaps what is necessary is the connectedness to some community not necessarily the cohort community, and the cohort community rule of life would be simpler. At the same time one professor noted that a community of practice had emerged over the four years and was obvious in the commitment, of students to one another and their various projects. Each one was significantly invested in the work of their peers, and this arose naturally out of the ongoing relationships of working together and critiquing one another's work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these findings suggest areas for growth and development as we move forward. They also reveal that spiritual formation is taking place, from students' perspectives, based on current practices and perhaps even in spite of what we are doing. In this section I want to look at practices we want to keep as they are, those we want to keep and perhaps change, and then suggest those things that we might want to stop or others we might want to consider adding.

First, times of devotions and prayer were significant to many students and faculty. Students commented on devotions that integrated with the topics being discussed, both in general and in reference to a specific devotion that had led to key insights for growth and perspective. Prayer times, both planned and spontaneous were highly valued by students. In addition, from their comments, they valued the informal times together with professors and peers. What professors live and model in their spiritual walk with God is important to students. These practices we want to continue including in intentional ways, though the specifics will vary with each professor. At the same time we need to encourage openness to the spontaneous opportunities that arise from time to time.

Second, as professors, we need to consider developing further how to make best use of the Personal Rule of Life. From studies done on the failure of leaders in ministry, practices of self-care, spiritual development, and accountability seem to be key elements to both thriving (thus not failing) and recovery from failure or burnout. Our use of these has been inconsistent and will require discussion among key faculty to think

through ways to incorporate this practice with accountability into the cohort process. The biggest challenge seems to be the vision for follow through and means for accountability.

In addition, we need to look at a variety of ways to use the different forms of retreat and reflection. For example, in a recent cohort, Module 1, we took the students on a two and a half day retreat which included times of solitude, group interaction, and reflection, and some introductory teaching the doctoral study process. In the course evaluations, the students clearly valued this time because it created a space to separate from the business of their ministries, allowed them to build community and relationships with one another, and to seek God for his direction in life and studies. On the other hand, taking this time from the normal classroom schedule created pressure on how to best cover the required material for the cohort—a challenge that needs further discussion.

Third, I would suggest that we may want to consider dropping the requirement for the Community Rule of Life and in its place look at developing Communities of Practice, allowing them to emerge over the course of the program. Identifying this process would allow students to understand and value the relationships that are being built over the course of the entire program and not just one module.

Fourth, a number of suggestions appeared in the comments that have potential for inclusion in future cohorts, but need to be discussed among faculty. Perhaps the most significant to emerge is the importance of the informal gatherings of professors and students. While this seems to be emerging naturally, highlighting the significance of these interactions is important. In addition, a number of suggestions were mentioned only once, but have broader potential if available to all faculty. These might include such things as: Lectio Divina, simulation activities, a list of Ways God Speaks, sharing spiritual journeys, intentional conversations about the integration of spiritual journey and academic journey, a time of prayer and consecration at the beginning and end of intensives. Each one of these activities seem to be practices of one, or maybe two, professors that the rest of us could learn from for future cohorts.

In conclusion, these basic surveys have revealed that spiritual formation is happening, which is encouraging. At the same time, we can see areas where we can grow and be more intentional about practices in our cohorts that will enhance the spiritual development and leadership of our students.

Notes

1. See Clinton's work on finishing well (2012: 208-210), Wilson and Hoffmann on *Preventing Ministry Failure* (2007: 26-27)

2. See also Chuck Miller (2007), Leonard Doohan (2007), Ruth Haley Barton (2006), Reggie McNeal (2000), and Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath (1999).

3. Responses from those who did not use or experience a given practice were excluded from the calculations. I also discarded findings where fewer than twenty-five people responded as the weighted responses were skewed because of the lack of numbers, and they were practices used in only one or two cohorts. Only the same eight practices are included in the additional tables as well.

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